

**REMARKS OF UNITED STATES SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI
TO ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES 2006 LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
JULY 6, 2006
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA**

If you asked visitors to our great land which of Alaska's seasons is the best – they'd probably say "summer." The endless daylight... the fish are running... birds and whales and wildlife for the viewing. The spectacular scenery. To our visitors from across the globe summer in Alaska is for recreation.

Summer means something different to the Native peoples of Alaska. Summer means something different in these places where fish and game and birds are preferred to store bought food. In the more than 200 villages of rural Alaska... where the cost of living is high and the amenities we take for granted – indoor plumbing, reliable electricity and broadband Internet -- are sparse.

In rural Alaska summer is about survival.

Summer is about hunting, and fishing and gathering the subsistence foods that carry you and your family and your village through the harsh winter.

And it's about taking advantage of seasonal wage employment that is available only during the summer. That's because there are very few opportunities for people in our villages to participate in the wage economy during the winter. The point of this conference, of course, is to change

this paradigm by creating year-round sustainable economies in our villages.

But until that day our Native people will continue to fight wildfires during the summer to buy fuel for the snowmachine during the winter.

In the Lower 48 and in urban Alaska we think of snowmachines as a recreational vehicle. In rural Alaska we call it basic transportation. That's the snowmachine you will use to haul the wood to heat your home, to transport your kids to the plane for a basketball tournament, and to transport yourself to the airstrip when you need to go to town for medical attention.

That's not the only reason our Native people need to generate cash Diesel fuel is the primary energy source in rural Alaska and its not just used for running the snowmachine, it also the primary mode of generating electricity in the village.

I would invite our visitors from outside of the State to ask our friends from rural Alaska what the price of a gallon of gas is in the villages. The answers will astound you.

Live isn't easy in the villages of rural Alaska, but is spiritually rewarding. It is rewarding because there are few other places in this world where self reliance counts for everything.

Tens of thousands of years of history have taught our Native people that if you want to continue to do things the way your ancestors did and if you want to be true to the tradition and culture – you need to believe in

yourself and believe in that culture and those traditions. That leads you to work hard and to be self sufficient.

Those are the strengths that sustained our Native peoples through epidemics and “adopting out”.

Those are the strengths that lead our Native people to teach their children in the traditional languages as well as the English language, ignoring the past teachings of religious and government schools that Native languages are antiquated and barbaric.

And that is the mission that causes us to turn away from spectacular Alaska summer and to come inside – not only to come into a ballroom like this but also turn inward and focus on how we can improve the condition of our Native peoples.

Three years ago, under Julie Kitka’s leadership, we came together for the first time to ponder the question whether Alaska’s Native people must leave their homelands, give up their culture, and move to the city if they want to participate in the global economy of the 21st Century and beyond. And we promptly rejected that hypothesis.

Defeat of the Native culture is not an option.

We came together to recognize that as much as our Native people want things to stay the same and want to be left alone... the price of ignoring the realities of the 21st Century is a threat to the survival of our Native peoples.

And we came to grips with the notion that all is not beautiful in rural Alaska – even if the terrain is some of the most breathtaking in the world.

We came to grips with the notion that our children are not being given the opportunity to perform in school.

We came to grips with the notion that if we do not beat the 20th Century epidemics of alcohol and drugs once and for all, they will forever hold our children in poverty.

Poverty... that's a word that used to be taboo in our Native communities. It was taboo because "poverty" infers reliance on the material things for one's happiness. It was held that if one lives in the traditional Native way, one is wealthy, even though one may lack riches in a material sense.

But as we see the devastation of suicides and alcohol related accidents that shorten the lives of our young people, even as their grandparents are living longer.

When we appreciate the chronically high unemployment rates in rural Alaska and when we look at the number of Native people in prison, we appreciate that poverty drags us down and we resolve that our children and our grandchildren should not be burdened by it.

We resolve that as a matter of cultural survival, our Native people cannot be burdened by poverty.

We resolve that poverty cannot be the price we pay for living in the Native way.

And we appreciate that self sufficiency is the way out of poverty, just as it has been the way out of every other challenge that has threatened our Native peoples for generations and generations.

Thanks to Julie's leadership and the hard work of so many in this room, Alaska's summer is no longer just about fishing the salmon, picking the berries, taking the whale, or hunting moose and the caribou.

Thanks to Julie's leadership, Alaska's summer is now about bringing the best minds from around the world together around the question of how to help our Native people adapt and survive the challenges of the future –without compromising that which is special and that which is sacred.

I am proud to have participated in every one of these Leadership Conferences and I am delighted that the ideas which are generated here set the agenda for action. We see this most vividly in the launch of the Alaska Marketplace which has paired Alaska's rural business people with sources of capital and mentors to pursue their ideas. And that's just the start of what conferences like this can accomplish.

I'm delighted that you have invited me once again to help you kick off this most important gathering. I'm looking forward to hearing what new big idea comes out of this year's gathering. And I pledge to continue to work with you for the betterment of our Native people in Alaska and the first peoples of our great Nation.

Thank you and good morning.